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## **BEYOND SILKS AND SPICES, EAST AND WEST: A TRANSCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE**

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### **Introduction**

The main idea I would like to develop and assess in this paper was upheld and defended by Paul Ricoeur in his famous dictum that 'To say self is not to say I', and its corollary that 'the shortest route from self to self is through the other'. That there is an implicit dialectic is underlined in another short passage taken from Ricoeur's book *Oneself as Another*:

[...] the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other, that instead one passes into the other, as we might say in Hegelian terms.<sup>1</sup>

These references point to deep metaphysical positions that I am not going to deal with as my objective here is rather the field of cultural and civilization studies. Ricoeur's commanding idea can be applied to the larger context of cultures, civilizations, and the nature of their relationships. In other words, cultures and civilizations cannot live in isolation, their intimate nature as well as their transformation in time requires a large degree of interaction, hence the insistence on the importance of transcultural phenomena.

Explaining how different, alien - that is to say 'other' elements - impact cultures and civilizations is a worthwhile task. And to know whether their cultural absorption can be the source for a profound questioning, if not a theoretical refoundation is the horizon of my present endeavor. So doing, it will be shown how a new collaborative basis between the East and the West can be thought of to remove an enduring misunderstanding that has plagued real intercultural relations for quite some time.

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blamey, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 3.

That the problem is acute nowadays comes from the fact that we now live in a global context: the first point we can make is that cultural differences tend to be blurred from one side of the planet to the other. Notwithstanding the language barrier, urbanized Chinese people can feel at home in European cities and the same can be said of Europeans travelling to Chinese megacities. Conversely, and this is the second point, cultural identity is usually perceived as fundamental and foundational, meaning sometimes the rejection of whatever is alien to multiseccular traditions. Lastly, the global-cosmopolitan homogenizing perspective judges cultures and civilizations as opposed as such and in principle to any transfer of cultural paradigms.

A tentative answer can be conjectured through the reconsideration of transculturality as a fundamental movement that has always existed, and which operates the necessary transformations of complex cultural settings through time. This, at least, is my contention.

All this needs clarification, and some reconstruction as well, before we can see some justification for a possible synthesis under the label of transcultural studies, with the proviso that these studies should select certain objectives and reject others. After an enquiry into the main issues relevant to the definitions of culture and civilization, I shall proceed to an exploration of the problem diverting civilization studies from the transcultural question. Eventually, I will suggest a possible way out of this unsettling dilemma.

## **I- Civilization and culture**

We are easily overawed by concepts saturated with meaning. This is the case with ‘civilization’ or ‘culture’; they defy simple definitions and they tend to become ‘idols of the market place’. For this reason, it is all the more necessary to reveal their presuppositions and to provide a clear basis for our own interpretation.

From Lucien Febvre in the 1930’s to Jean Baechler today, three generations of French historians, linguists and sociologists have returned to these words to reconstruct their history as well as their philosophical significance, and to define the conditions and the scope of their usage<sup>2</sup>. In the following, I am indebted to their enquiries even if I have deliberately focused on some elements to suit my purpose.

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<sup>2</sup> Lucien Febvre et al., *Civilisation. Le mot et l’idée*, exposés par Lucien Febvre, Émile Tonnellat, Marcel Mauss, Adfredo Niceforo et Louis Weber. Fondation “Pour la science”, Centre international de synthèse, Paris, la Renaissance du livre, 1930 ; Emile Benveniste, « Civilisation : contribution à l’histoire du mot » in *Problèmes de*

Historically speaking, both concepts were created in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The word ‘civilization’ is mainly a French invention, whereas ‘culture’, in its modern sense (not referring to the cultivation of an area for example), was more systematically surveyed by the Germans. Civilization was derived from ‘civilized’, ‘civility’, and ‘to civilize’, which were already in use. It was presented from the outset as a historical process and employed to oppose barbarity better than the word ‘civility’, which meant ‘being or acting in a polite manner’.<sup>3</sup> With Herder and Goethe, who equated ‘Kultur’ with ‘Bildung’, ‘culture’ acquired a meaning very similar to ‘civilization’ since it was used with the idea that it is possible to write a history of culture, and refer to the stages mankind had been through up to the modern age.

From the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the words spread through the whole of Europe and were often used interchangeably, even if national idiosyncrasies tended to endow these terms with special distinctions. In Germany, for instance, in the wake of the Napoleonic intrusion, Fichte attached to Kultur the idea of a mission, which could be undertaken by the State, and by the time of Bismarck, it had become synonymous with social progress.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, each word acquired a significance of its own, and the study of culture was differentiated from the study of civilizations, which was increasingly used in the plural form because of this distancing. Eventually, it was Edward Burnett Tylor who produced the main split, even though he seemed to use the two terms interchangeably.<sup>4</sup>

Tylor’s book, *Primitive Culture*, contained what he called a ‘**theory of survivals**’. According to this theory, certain traditional elements are kept in the uniform course of social evolution and they contrast with the civilizing process. Culture then, tends to be associated to the primitive background of societies, the spirit animating their foundations whereas civilization points to the material achievements, the crystallization of culture through time.<sup>5</sup>

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*linguistique générale*, Paris, Gallimard coll. « Tel » vol. 1, 1966, p. 336-345 ; Fernand Braudel, *Grammaire des civilisations* [1987], Paris, Champs-Flammarion, 1993 ; Jean Baechler, *Les matrices culturelles : Au foyer des cultures et des civilisations*, Paris, Hermann, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> In Britain, the coining of ‘civilization’ followed closely on the French steps during discussions between the Scot James Boswell and the Englishman Samuel Dr. Johnson. It also replaced ‘civility’ for about the same reasons as already exposed.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Tylor. 1920. *Primitive Culture* [1871], New York, J.P. Putnam’s Sons. Volume 1, 1920, p. 1 : ‘Culture, or civilization, taken in its broad, ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’.

<sup>5</sup> Civilization becomes a kind of horizon which, even if partaking to the same structure as culture, represents a super-cultural compound, if not, if we push this logic into our own global context, a universal structure comprising the great diversity of all human cultures. As Jean Baechler remarked, the distinction between civilization and culture displays a theme/variation dialectic where civilization stands for the theme and cultures for the variations. He even goes as far as suggesting that this dialectic eventually reconciles in the emergence of a new theme-civilization, or a totally-integrated culture, in three or four generations of distinct cultural

Of course this **dynamic distinction civilization/culture** is extremely meaningful as the historical and progressive ascent of civilization towards its completion through modernity is contrasted with the cultures that have kept their traditional status and have not materialized into a larger construct. In other words, the concept of Western European civilization, with its urban ways opposing the rhythms and symbols of country life, reproduced on a greater scale the political diagram of the 18<sup>th</sup> century opposing Town and Country, and it was increasingly viewed as the final stage of the process of civilization of the whole of mankind. This concurs with Henry Thomas Buckle's mid-19<sup>th</sup> century design to write on the history of civilization, and its quasi-romantic incompleteness when Buckle stopped after his first part on the history of civilization in England, seeing that this latter was so perfect that there was no need dealing with other less perfect civilizations.<sup>6</sup>

The growing ideological scope of the couple civilization/culture is therefore a product of modern thinking in Europe and its historical significance is also fortified by its geopolitical implication. As the concept of culture became an ideological model used for extolling the merits and the ideals of specific societies or countries, culture remained perceived as a closed system, as a separate and homogeneous sphere<sup>7</sup>. By contrast, the idea of civilization increasingly pointed to the vantage point of the European world, justifying its ascendancy and endowing it with the mission to spread its values worldwide<sup>8</sup>.

It is on this basis that cultures and civilizations have been studied, and that a **big misunderstanding** has come forth. Beyond the objective need for silk, sugar and spices in the West, East-West collaboration has been determined by such representations in the modern era. A new collaborative basis is indeed required, and the misunderstanding must be removed. But before seeing how it can be overturned, it is important to study the methodological prejudices that have led to it.

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variations, stressing the unity in diversity in the dialectic of the one and the many, making, that is, a concrete universal of civilization. Cf. Jean Baechler, *Les matrices culturelles : Au foyer des cultures et des civilisations*, Paris, Hermann, 2008, p. 21-25.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on Buckle, see our article « Henry Thomas Buckle, ou l'Angleterre comme *sens* de l'Occident », *Les sens de l'Occident*, Arras, Artois Presses Université, 2006, p. 169-185.

<sup>7</sup> For this notion of isolated cultural spheres, see Wolfgang Welsch, "Transculturality - the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today", in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, ed. by Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash, London, Sage 1999, 194-213.

<sup>8</sup> See the book of the British anthropologist Jack Goody, who claimed Europe had 'stolen history' in imposing its own reading of it to the world in *The Theft of History*, Cambridge, C. U. P., 2006.

## II- The methodology & presuppositions of ‘civilization studies’

The origin of ‘Civilization Studies’ as such is difficult to establish. Their objective is generally to combine different perspectives, such as geography, history, politics, economics, sociology, philosophy and literature in order to throw light on the spirit of a people, its particularities as well as the singularity of its aspiration to universality. This kind of research is generally undertaken by the ‘history of ideas’, according to its formal definition and constitution by Arthur Lovejoy, when he set up the ‘History of Ideas Club’ at the Johns Hopkins University in 1923. But, again, it is difficult to define what this discipline is exactly up to, as many controversies about the definition of its conceptual logic have scattered it into many related disciplines like *Intellectual History*, *Cultural History*, the *History of Mentalities*, *Social History*, *Cultural Studies*, etc.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Donald R. Kelley<sup>10</sup> has traced a possible origin for Lovejoy’s idealistic Unit-Ideas, and thus the discipline of the ‘history of ideas’, in Victor Cousin’s ‘Eclectic Philosophy’, which is generally viewed as the culmination of the French philosophy of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the period, that is, when the modern concepts of civilization and culture were elaborated.

Admittedly, a few key texts, produced in the wake of the European Enlightenment period have sought to reveal the *Volksgeist*, the spirit of a people. And their investigations of the profound aspirations and the main motives of a people can help us determine more closely on what premises ‘civilization studies’ were constituted. As a Frenchman, I must needs mention Montesquieu, and the famous nineteenth book of *L’Esprit des lois*, published in 1748, shortly before the concept of civilization was forged. This book is entitled “Of the Laws in Relation to the Principles which form the General Spirit, the Morals, and Customs of a Nation”. There, Montesquieu evoked climatic and cultural causalities to account for the identity of a people. He provided a relativistic and internist representation that questioned the value of every people on earth. It was founded on the premise that cultures are isolated spheres and it presupposed an international pattern anticipating in a way Samuel Huntington’s more recent vision of an inevitable clash between civilizations<sup>11</sup>.

This methodology must be completed with another approach, assuming the idea that every nation aspires to universality and therefore partakes, though at different levels and in

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<sup>9</sup> See Allan Megill, « Globalization and the History of Ideas », *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, Vol. 66 N°2, April 2005, p. 179-187.

<sup>10</sup> Donald R. Kelley, *The Descent of Ideas: The History of Intellectual History*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon & Chuster, 1996.

different periods, to universal history, that is, to global history. But it is nevertheless necessary to say how they do it.

In the concept of the Spirit of a people, there is something amounting to the idea that it is based on some disequilibrium, since some customs or some types of behaviour have an advantage over others. **Civilizations select thematic cultural elements** defining and exhibiting their identity and their singularity, establishing a hierarchy which Ruth Benedict called “patterns of culture”:

A culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action. Within each culture there come into being characteristic purposes not necessarily shared by other types of society [...] Taken-up by a well-integrated culture, the most ill-assorted acts become characteristic of its peculiar goals, often by the most unlikely metamorphoses. The form that these acts take we can understand only by understanding first the emotional and intellectual mainsprings of that society.<sup>12</sup>

The last sentence is all the more interesting as it vindicates two fundamental approaches. First, we have the idea that 'patterns of culture' are the cultural make-up of each civilization, in isolation. This relativistic viewpoint amounts to some kind of empirical and epistemological conception that implies real skepticism as to the universal value of these patterns. The only way to by-pass this is to legitimize every civilization in its aspiration to reveal the essence of humanity in their own way, and to acknowledge the idea that civilizations also aspire to truth and universality, for which they represent one particular example. Paradoxically, this point is the second aspect of Ruth Benedict's sentence requiring attention: we need to study 'the emotional and intellectual mainsprings' of a civilization to understand it. And these are of course best studied through their literary and philosophical expression, before their adaptation into political or economic correlates.

All recent historiographic trends and movements have implied such a literary or a philosophical perspective aiming at ruling out the story of any one-sided domination, and they

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<sup>12</sup> Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (1934), Boston , Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989, p. 46.

have tried to establish a more balanced and peaceful global vision of cultures and civilizations<sup>13</sup>.

### III- The global vision of cultures and civilizations

The world is not, of course, limited to Europe. The time when Europeans viewed themselves as the final stage of human civilization, justifying their domination of the world, amounts now to little more than an oddity, if not an anomaly. After the two world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after Decolonization and the antagonisms of the Cold War period, the Global vision has composed a new narrative for the world. Using a concept developed by Immanuel Wallerstein<sup>14</sup>, The center of gravity of the world-system, which was posited on Europe and the Atlantic in the wake of the industrial revolutions is now re-directed towards Asia, where it was dominant before the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>15</sup>. Since the last century, interpretations of the order of the world seem to have progressed in a dialectical manner: the very one-sided interpretation of the domination of Europe was followed by a deconstruction of this Eurocentric vision with the demise of European powers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, with *Globalization* emerged a pattern eager for restoring a more balanced view of world-history.

The second moment in this dialectic coincided with diverse historiographic fields and trends such as the *Postcolonial* and *Subaltern Studies* and the *World-Global History*, offering itself as something new, removing all ancient national histories, in particular the European ones. Admittedly, *Postcolonial Studies* were a major historiographic shift and they have decolonized academic historiography.<sup>16</sup> What is new is that people outside Europe have

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<sup>13</sup> In this context, see the important conclusion of André Gunder Franck in his book *ReOrient, Global Economy in the Asian Age*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1998, p. 359: 'The purpose of this book is instead to help construct an intellectual basis for accepting *diversity in unity* and celebrating *unity in diversity*. Alas, those who need it most will be the ones least interested. And those who wish to arm for the "clash of civilizations," if they even acknowledge this book, will do battle against it by invoking ever more culturalological and civilizationist arguments. That is because, the evidence presented in this book helps pull the historical rug out from under their social "science," which is little more than a mask for Eurocentric ideology of domination. And that is already being undermined by the world historical process itself-for which we can be grateful.'

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System*, 3 vols. New York & Orlando, Florida, Academic Press, 1974-88, & *The Capitalist World-Economy*, Cambridge, CUP, 1979.

<sup>15</sup> For a brief outline of the alternation of civilizations in the history of the world and the cultural predicament of the present situation, see Jean-Pierre Warnier, *La mondialisation de la culture*, Paris, La découverte, 2007 (4<sup>th</sup> edition).

<sup>16</sup> The 'Postcolonial turn' is due to many influences, including the French **deconstructionist theories** as well as Edward Saïd's book on *Orientalism*, but what draws the attention more particularly is the introduction of literary studies and hermeneutics in historical studies, in addition to the contributions and the new interpretations provided by scholars coming from the former colonies. In brief, the ancient focus on economics, politics and the military, and the former domination of Western scholars have receded.



something to say about the history of the world, and that literary or philosophical studies can also assess the real organization of the world. The key idea is that colonialism was not only a military or an economic expansion but that it also resided in conceptual violence. It was therefore suggested that the Western conceptual framework had to be undone, broken up altogether.

But in trying to get rid of the Eurocentric historiography, *Postcolonial Studies* and *Subaltern Studies* are raring “to provincialize Europe”<sup>17</sup>, as if to counterbalance the fact that Europe has been too much universalized. Criticism has sometimes amounted to mere caricature, and the whole scheme provoked contentious issues more than it was really conclusive. *Postcolonial Studies* sometimes give the impression of growing in the shade of the old colonial paradigm, over-emphasizing a fundamental opposition between “them” and “us”, and fostering a Manichean vision of the world that does no good to East-West collaboration.

Nowadays, a more synthetic approach has emerged. This is the latest offering of a ‘hermeneutic turn’, following the former ‘linguistic turn’ and re-designing ancient Eurocentric interpretations. Some people think it is now a dominant international historiographic trend whose task resides in providing the history of the whole world and insisting on the notion of influence. What is taken as fundamental now, in the Age of the Internet, is the fact that history is now thought of in terms of global history or geography (the ‘spatial turn’, or ‘geographic turn’) with the view to revealing networks, worldwide nets of interaction<sup>18</sup>.

Nevertheless, to say that we live in a post-national world where the global vision predominates is too adventurous. There are still nations, distinct civilizations and a plurality of cultures. If the interactions between nations are often built on domination and exploitation tactics, the constant desire to colonize and its antagonist resistance and decolonization patterns also indicate that the true agents in the historical development of the world are the civilizations themselves, in the name of their intrinsic significance, averse to the domination of any foreign civilization.

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<sup>17</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Brian Graham & Catherine Nash, *Modern Historical Geographies*, Harlow, Pearson Education, 2000; Doreen Massey, *For Space*, London, Sage, 2005; C. W. J. Withers, “Place and the ‘Spatial Turn’ in geography and history”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 70, 4 (October 2009).



## Conclusion: the foundations of transcultural studies

We must now adjust a coherent understanding of the workings of civilizations and the way they are likely to accept the transplantation of foreign ideas, the hybridization or the integration of wholly new cultural paradigms. This is what we can call Transculturality, and it is based on the crucial fact of the transmission and the transformation of cultures inside the whole complex of civilizations. The objective is to understand how this operates, and it is necessary to see it through the process of influence. Paul Ricoeur had suggested, that ‘the shortest route from self to self is through the other’, but we must also indicate the reason why it is so.<sup>19</sup>

The mechanism of influence<sup>20</sup> might well be a refreshment of ideas, a revival, a clarification of things being too complex to be assimilated. It is often said, for instance, that civilizations crumble when they have become too complex: a return to common speech, to traditional forms renewed and adapted to new situations is thus regularly needed. As Stéphane Mallarmé said, it is imperative to “purify the dialect of the tribe”. Something new is necessary for something deeply-rooted to come out, but this novelty should not be too strange either.

The lessons we can draw from this is that the more stubbornly national writers are when they include foreign elements, the more real and the more concrete they will be, as their emotions and ideas will echo and adapt their own ‘patterns of culture’ to forever changing contexts. So doing, they will reach universality and cross the threshold of things where everyone feels at home. The more they take influence from the world by giving “a local habitation and a name” to their digested forms, the more universal they shall be. The abstract ideal of one unique and homogeneous Human civilization made by abstract “citizens of the world” with no particular roots is an incongruous chimera.

To acknowledge the importance of other cultures and other civilizations is crucial for the development of one’s own, this seems to be the only way to understand the importance of the transnational question for civilization studies. Other cultures cannot be substituted to our

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<sup>19</sup> A few modern authors have pointed to one specificity of influence: its power - or faculty - to awaken or arouse forgotten elements of consciousness. William Butler Yeats, the first Nobelized Irish poet, considered that “we do not seek truth in arguments or in books, but clarification of what we already believe” (W. B. Yeats, *Explorations*, New York, Macmillan, 1962, p. 130). This idea echoes an almost similar statement made by Friedrich Nietzsche when he gave the subtitle “How we become what we are” to *Ecce Homo*, a book listing his influences in the shaping of his mind. The same could also be said of Sigmund Freud’s famous “*wo es war, soll ich werden*”, giving the gist of his own idea of consciousness and of psychoanalysis.

<sup>20</sup> The etymology of the word also helps making out the significance and the aim of influence. “To influence” comes from the Latin verb *influer*, meaning “to flow into”. Metaphorically, the operation of influence consists in transfusing a fluid, perhaps animating an organism and trying to re-awaken or re-establish what it truly is. But such a transfusion must be carried out with a fluid which is not totally unfamiliar, in which case it is rejected.

own, but they are necessary for our enrichment, our refinement and the rediscovery of our true specificity. Exchange is fundamental. Mutual help is the key to mutual understanding.

It is useless to deny the importance of the classical study of 'patterns of culture' proper to every civilization. It is stupid to consider that there is no interest in pursuing the relativist and cultural anthropology, granting every civilization its own idiosyncrasies. But otherness, when all is said, is an open possibility for self-awareness and mutual understanding.

### **Anecdotal remark added during the discussion after my paper was delivered**

The deconstruction of the ideological misunderstanding behind the methodological choices nurtured by civilization studies is paradoxically constructive. And I would like to feed this case with an anecdote. During the first Congress of the World Literature Association, which took place in Beijing in June 2011, the Eurocentric view was particularly attacked by many speakers because of its dominant position in humanities. Mingdong Gu, a Chinese lecturer from the University of Texas in Dallas, remarked that it was impossible for the Chinese to study Chinese civilization without using the Western authorized methodological presuppositions and tools, which he called 'Sinologism' and accused of being a doctrine perpetuating Western imperialism. According to him, time had come in this global age to "[...] overcome the epistemological and methodological inertia of Sinologism, and explore new paradigms for China-West studies".

If I am not mistaken, I think these new paradigms are the only way to shake Western humanities from their present dogmatic slumber. The whole field of transnational studies finds some justification in the necessity to balance powers and to welcome other models to help all civilizations in their quest for universality and collaboration.

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